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ABSTRACT

The impact of television (TV) on children has been examined many times, and concern over potential connections between viewed violence and antisocial behavior has grown. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence concluded in 1969 that violence on television encourages real violence, especially among the children of poor, disorganized families. The report of the Scientific Advisory Committee to the Surgeon General concerning past studies and the five volumes of commissioned research on television and social behavior makes a major contribution to understanding the role of television in influencing the social behavior of children. The report and its underlying research make clear that there is evidence to support the hypothesis that the viewing of violence on television can lead to antisocial behavior. This is particularly disturbing because violence figures so prominently in television entertainment. While it is clearly beyond dispute that a reduction in the violent content of television is most desirable, it is not our place to suggest means for achieving this. However, we are carefully analyzing the report to identify additional follow-up study areas so that we can broaden our base of knowledge. (The author is the ass't. secretary for health and scientific affairs of the Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare.) (SH)

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STATEMENT

of

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND SCIENTIFIC AFFAIRS

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE

BEFORE THE

SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

March 21, 1972

EM 009 731

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to be here this morning to make a statement on the recent report of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. The Surgeon General, who is here with me today, serves as my principal professional advisor on this issue. As you know, he has had a continuous relationship with the advisory committee and his advice to me on this subject has been invaluable.

BACKGROUND

The impact of TV on child viewers has been examined many times by Congressional Committees and by industry, academic, health, and mental health investigators. Concern over potential connections between viewed violence and anti-social behavior has grown as the country has experienced new peaks in violent public actions. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence concluded in 1969 that violence on television encourages real violence, especially among the children of poor, disorganized families. The Commission recommended a reduction in programs containing violence and the elimination of violence from children's cartoon programs. Recognizing the need for new research, the Commission also called for long-term studies, and cited the importance of evaluating televised violence over a protracted period.

The history of the present Scientific Advisory Committee is, of course, well-known to you, Mr. Chairman. It was your request

to Secretary Finch to establish such a group in March 1969, which initiated its development. Your continued interest in the Committee's studies as well as your grasp of the difficulties presented by the evaluation of data concerning social behavior have served to emphasize the importance of this undertaking while also giving the work a proper perspective.

REPORT FINDINGS

The Committee's report, which consisted of an assessment of previous studies as well as new studies commissioned for purposes of the report, was submitted to the Surgeon General on January 19, 1972. In conjunction with the five volumes of research upon which it is based, the report makes a major contribution to an understanding of the role of television in influencing the social behavior of children and young people.

The report's central finding is that a modest relationship exists between the viewing of violence on television and aggressive tendencies in children, adolescents, and in certain circumstances adults. As reported by the Committee:

> "Thus, there is a convergence of the fairly substantial experimental evidence for short-run causation of aggression among some children by viewing violence on the screen and the much less certain evidence from field studies that extensive violence viewing precedes some long-run manifestations of aggressive behavior. This convergence of the two types of evidence constitutes some preliminary indication of a causal relationship, but a good deal of research remains to be done before one can have confidence in these conclusions."

Those young children (ages four to six) who were highly aggressive to begin with, were found most responsive to this violence. In short, as the report and its underlying research make clear, there is evidence to support the hypothesis that the viewing of violence on television leads to anti-social behavior in many instances and under certain circumstances.

The hypothesis is particularly disturbing because violence figures prominently in television entertainment. As the report's summary points out, "People are probably exposed to violence by television entertainment more than they are exposed by other media because they use television so much more." (at p. 3) The rate of violent episodes in television drama between 1967 and 1969 for each national network is extremely high, with a substantial proportion of this violence contributed by cartoons, which are viewed primarily by younger children. A detailed study by George Gerbner, appearing in Volume I of the reports and papers, concludes that, "Strictly defined as the overt expression of physical force intended to hurt or kill, violence prevailed in about eight of every ten plays during prime time and Saturday morning network television drama. Scenes of violence were shown at the rate of five per play or eight per hour." (at p. 39) Cartoons provided 151 violent episodes in 1967, less than one-third of all such episodes on prime time and Saturday morning network plays. In 1969, however, as Gerbner points out, "Cartoons share of all violent episodes was 254, more than half of the total." (at p. 38)

The members of this Committee, the media, the scientific community, and other interested parties have all reviewed the

report with its five volumes of original research, therefore, I believe it unnecessary to repeat for you other examples of the report before providing the Department's professional response on this material.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Mr. Chairman, I have reached some very definite conclusions, after a review of the Committee's report, and in consultation with my advisors on this subject, Dr. Steinfeld and the National Institute of Mental Health, the most significant being that it is beyond dispute that a reduction in the violent content of television programming is most desirable. However, it was not the responsibility of the Advisory Committee, nor is it within the capability of our Department, to propose the means of achieving this, and we must look primarily to the recommendations of the Federal Communications Commission.

Within our own area of competence, research into factors bearing on the mental health of children will remain an important NIMH and Department priority. At the direction of Secretary Richardson, we are currently engaged in an intensive analysis of the report and its supporting data in order that we may determine what additional follow-up studies must now be undertaken, through our normal grant-review and award processes, in order further to broaden our base of knowledge. As the report explains, it's "tentative and limited conclusions are not very satisfying. They represent substantially

more knowledge than we had two years ago, but they leave many questions unanswered." (at p. 113)

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement, however, my colleagues and I will be pleased to respond to any questions.